

A Sick Joke

By Richard Starnes



THERE has always been a question in the minds of thoughtful persons as to whether Sucker Comearly, specimen American, had the mother wit to make self-government work.

A growing accumulation of evidence indicates that history will write a resounding "no" in response to the question.

Congress, which has degenerated into a complex and arcane system of government by campaign contribution, is a sick joke. In the forthcoming election its assembly of mediocrities, corn-pone cynics and plain crooks is likely to be

further debased by the addition of a retired astronaut and an erstwhile coach of a large, greedily commercial football team. Neither has demonstrated any special capacity for the jobs they now seek.

The sane mortal has to despair for the future of the nation when he witnesses the tumultuous hero worship that is accorded such sharply limited individuals. An astronaut is a skillful and courageous test pilot, but the Russians have demonstrated that a relatively untrained woman could undertake the job, and, indeed, we have shown that an American-trained chimp could survive a ride in a rocket capsule. There may be a constitutional question involved in the election of a chimpanzee to Congress, of course, altho I believe a thoro job of research might turn up some precedents.

The truth of the matter is that Mr. Bud Wilkinson, the aspiring lawgiver who trained for the task by exhorting sweaty collegians to push a football across a field, might turn out to be the greatest Oklahoma statesman since Alfalfa Bill Murray. But the weight of evidence is to the contrary, and the prudent observer must conclude that his principal qualification for office is the backlog of mob adulation he has laid by.

John Glenn, the intrepid birdman, might also turn out to be the most noble Ohio Throttlebottom since Warren Harding. But again, the record offers no support for any such rosy hope. The Senate

has had unfortunate experience with airplane chaps, from Joe McCarthy, the late tail-gunner and Indian Charlie tactician, to His Worship Barry Goldwater, whose qualifications as a jet pilot are undisputed.

Now, of course, this caveat is not intended to cast even the briefest shadow of doubt on either man's integrity, or his unswerving dedication to the common weal. But what discerning adult can doubt that both are being shamelessly manipulated by self-seeking men writhing in the terminal throes of cynicism? Does Col. Glenn's skill at astronautics equip him to weigh the terrible questions that assail mankind? Will Mr. Wilkinson's understanding of the esoteric variations of the split T enable him to help protect our Democracy against the growing threat of Pentagon-CIA hegemony? Does either have sufficient grasp of economics, the social sciences, history or government?

The answer is cruelly obvious.

Col. Glenn and Mr. Wilkinson, unfortunately, are not the products of any new phenomenon. Americans traditionally have elected moronic frontier bullies, lucky generals, popular heroes and the under-qualified sons of rich men; they are unlikely to change.

There was, one is distressed to record, even a boomlet (as persistent as it was foolish) advocating the election of the Rev. Billy Graham as President. Mr. Graham's credentials to conduct lectures in celestial navigation are not being called into question, but we should have enough insight to understand that this does not qualify him to lead the nation. Prayer and rectitude have their utility in government, as Henry IV once sagely observed, but unsupported by some of the more mundane skills they could lead to disaster.

The evangelist, fortunately, took himself out of the race, but this is no credit to the dolts who sponsored his boom.

It isn't enough to point out that the Republic has survived incompetents, swindlers and wholesome innocents in high office before. The question is whether it can continue to survive them in an era of unparalleled peril.

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